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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007016

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON LEGISLATURE PRESIDENT

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Thailand's interim legislature will work actively and cooperate with the interim administration to advance national interests, according the legislature President Meechai Ruchupan. In a November 21 meeting with the Ambassador, Meechai indicated the parliament would strive to push through legislation while unencumbered by the constraints elected legislators would face. Meechai, one of Thailand's foremost legal experts, declined to suggest features of Thailand's next constitution, although he noted the system of checks and balances established by the 1997 Constitution had failed. He expected progress soon in forming the Constitution Drafting Assembly but noted that elections next year might take place a month or two later than expected. End Summary.

NLA TO SUPPORT THE ADMINISTRATION

2. (U) The Ambassador called on National Legislative Assembly (NLA) President Meechai Ruchupan on November 21. The NLA arranged extensive media presence, and more than a dozen NLA staff members joined the meeting.

3. (C) Meechai opened the meeting by commenting on Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont's positive exchange with President Bush at the APEC gathering in Hanoi. Meechai remarked that it was difficult for foreigners to understand the complex dynamics that had led to the September 19 coup d'etat. The Ambassador replied that U.S. policymakers viewed Thailand as a friend and ally, and the USG would seek to provide help and understanding when a friend encountered difficulties.

4. (C) The Ambassador asked what sort of role Meechai envisioned for the NLA. Meechai replied that the NLA should pass legislation at an expedited pace, compared to previous parliaments. Because the interim constitution established a unicameral parliament, and because there was no opposition group within the parliament, it should be possible for the NLA to work quickly in support of the administration. When the Ambassador noted that the interim constitution prohibits the NLA from holding a vote of no-confidence, Meechai said he did not imagine this limitation mattered, as the NLA generally agreed with the administration's policies.

THE NEXT CONSTITUTION

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¶5. (C) Turning to the next constitution, the Ambassador asked for Meechai's assessment of the ongoing selection procedure to form the 2,000-member National People's Assembly (NPA). (Note: Once formed, the NPA will then select 200 of its own members, from which the Council for National Security will select 100, to form the Constitution Drafting Assembly -- CDA. By virtue of his position as President of the NLA, Meechai will serve as NPA President. End Note.) Meechai said the procedure was ongoing; once convened, the NPA would need only a day to select the CDA. He anticipated this selection would take place by mid-December.

¶6. (C) Aside from presiding over the NPA during its very short lifespan, Meechai would have no involvement in drafting the next constitution, he asserted. He even denied holding opinions on the substantive matters that the drafters would decide. Continuing to press, the Ambassador asked Meechai to explain an analogy he had previously used to argue for a constitution that addressed uniquely Thai circumstances. (In October, Meechai publicly compared the 1997 Constitution to a Rolls Royce, noting that such a vehicle, while desirable in foreign contexts, was not useful for Thai farmers' cultivation of rice.)

¶7. (C) Meechai explained that the system of checks and balances that the 1997 Constitution had established had proven inadequate. The 1997 Constitution created numerous watchdog bodies, to be staffed by independent persons of high caliber, nominated by a nonpartisan, elected Senate. This system had failed, however. If Senators were to be elected, they would surely rely on political parties, and this raised the possibility of single-party dominance, as had occurred

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with Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador noted USG concern that the CDA complete work on the new Constitution within the timeframe announced by the coup leaders, so elections could take place approximately one year after the coup. Meechai considered this timeframe realistic, and a deadline in the interim constitution ensured the process would not drag out indefinitely. But he noted the target date for elections might slip by a month or two.

COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) Given that the Council for National Security appointed both the Prime Minister and the members of the NLA, we would not expect the NLA to become adversarial toward the administration. We believe Meechai accurately represented his intention to support the Prime Minister's agenda, although we note that some members of the NLA have publicly criticized Meechai and might also use their seats in parliament to criticize the administration and its policies.

¶10. (C) We are skeptical about Meechai's claim that he will remain uninvolved in the constitution drafting process, even informally, and that he has few opinions on the salient issues. The format of this meeting, and the numerous NLA staff members in attendance, likely precluded Meechai from sharing his views more openly. We take note of his belief that there might be a slight lengthening of the timeframe for election, although it is too early to prejudge when the CDA may finish its work and how long it will take to prepare for elections after the next constitution's promulgation.

BOYCE